

Dennis Warren: "I have a nephew overseas, Maj. James Smith, who is a graduate of West Lauderdale High School and is in the Air Force with Special Operations. He has seen action around the world and taught at the War College."

"I would like to tell him how proud I am of him. I sleep better at night knowing that young men and women of his character are protecting us from all of the evils that are out there. It makes me tear up."

Dennis Warren is a play-by-play radio announcer for Meridian High School football.

Stan McCain: "I would like to say that I appreciate them being willing to go and fight for us and their country. We are all pulling for them. They are one big team like we are here with our sport teams. We are depending on them to get the job done for us."

"I know a lot of times they don't get a lot of recognition, but our thoughts and prayers are with them. We certainly appreciate the job they are doing."

Stan McCain is the head football coach at West Lauderdale High School.

Dave Owen: "I would simply say thank you. We talk about sports heroes and warriors and all of that kind of stuff over here, but it is just sports. Those men and women over there are away from their families and sacrificing their lives so we can enjoy the freedoms like going to sporting events and having presidential elections."

"Those men and women should remind us every day how lucky we are to have that. So I just want to say thank you to all of the men and women fighting for our freedoms and protecting us every day."

Dave Owen is president of Meridian High School's Wildcat Quarterback Club.

Vince McLemore: "I would tell the troops that we truly appreciate all that they do for our country. I want to say thank you for enabling us to live in the democracy that we live in today in the United States."

Vince McLemore is the athletic director and baseball coach at Meridian High School.

Anouk Jackson: "I want to tell the troops thank you. It makes us feel safer that we know somebody is over there fighting for us. When it first started, everybody was afraid, and it shows that people care about America. They are willing to leave their families and go fight for us. I appreciate it."

Anouk Jackson plays football and basketball for Meridian High School.

Bill Baldner: "I would like to tell the troops thanks a lot. I made a friendship with a guy recently who is a Vietnam veteran. When I was talking with him, I said, 'I really appreciate you guys going over there and doing that.'"

"He called me the next day and told me thanks for telling me thanks. He left a message on the answering machine and he said, 'Thanks for telling me thanks. You are only the second person in the whole world who has ever told me thanks.'"

"I know it isn't easy to leave, and I want to tell them thanks for sacrificing their families here and potentially their lives over there."

Bill Baldner is head baseball coach at East Mississippi Community College.



McCain

SPEAK UP

The Meridian Star asked area sports figures and fans, "If you could send a message to U.S. troops overseas, what would it be?"

Patsy Vance: "May God protect each of you. We are proud of the way you are fighting to help make the people free."

Patsy Vance is the wife of James Vance, director of Meridian basketball officials.

Faye Chapman: "I pray God's continued blessings upon each of you and that you would return home safely."

Faye Chapman of Newton is a sports fan.

Larry Gressett: "Thank you for the sacrifices you are making. I pray that God will protect you and bring you safely back to your families."

Larry Gressett of Newton is a former basketball coach at East Central Community College.

Nancy Futrell: "Thank you for your sacrifices and please keep the faith. Maybe you are fighting the most difficult war Americans have ever been involved in — a conflict as much of religious ideologies as economics or technologies. Don't let the struggle get you down. Keep the faith in God's divine providence and the stellar ideals of American freedoms and civil rights."

Nancy Futrell of Newton is a sports fan.

Jack Wright: "I just want to say that all of the troops are my heroes. They are doing a very courageous act for our freedom and protection of our country. It takes a lot of nerve to go over there to protect us, and I want to wish them safety and thank them from the bottom of my heart."

Jack Wright is the offensive line coach of Meridian High School's football team.



Wright

Kay Killens: "There are not sufficient words to thank you for the sacrifices you have made and continue to make. I pray daily for your safety and God's love and comfort for the loved ones who are at home waiting for your safe return. May God bless you and our country."

Kay Killens of Newton is wife of Mark Killens, who owns Killens Pontiac in Newton.

Reva Coate: "I cannot tell you how thankful I am for the troops. I may not know each one individually, but I care for them and their family. Y'all have sacrificed so much for us. I pray for y'all every night. May God bless you."

Reva Coate of Newton is a basketball player at Newton Academy.

Jennifer Wyatt: "There are not enough words to explain the sympathy that I have for the troops and their families. I pray every night that God will send the troops home safely to their families. God bless our country."

Jennifer Wyatt of Newton is a basketball player at Newton Academy.

Cole's only regret: Not joining sooner

Twenty-three-year-old Robert "Cole" Walker is originally from Sandersville. His mother, Lynne Dabbs, wrote this story on behalf of herself and her husband, Benny Dabbs.

Cole left for the Middle East on Dec. 27, 2004, and is currently stationed in Kirkuk, Iraq. He is scheduled to return home in June, but that is subject to change.

By Lynne Dabbs

special to The Star

Our son, Senior Airman Robert "Cole" Walker, is currently serving in Iraq. Cole is with the 248th Air Traffic Control Squadron of the Mississippi Air National Guard in Meridian.

As a child, Cole's "career" plans changed from week to week. He would practice his intended profession on family and friends.

Once, while planning to be a policeman, Cole left a speeding ticket on the windshield of a friend's car. And there was the time a "Detective" sign was placed on his bedroom door; no one was safe from his eavesdropping, following and questioning.

After a few years, Cole still could not decide what he wanted to do with his life. During his first and second years of college, he was constantly looking into fields that might interest him. Cole worked in different areas such as timber, maintenance and sales — but he knew that there was more that he could do with his life.

When he first mentioned joining the military, I was both proud of him and afraid for him. But, I also knew that he would give it a lot of thought and then do what he knew was right. As it turned out, he made the right decision.

In March of 2003, Cole left for basic training at Lackland Air Force Base in San

Antonio, Texas. While there, he served as element leader of his squadron and finished his training in May.

Cole's training was furthered at Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi. There he graduated "Top of the Class," as well as serving as a Yellow and Green Rope Airman Leader in August 2003.

He completed his training in air traffic control and received his certification at Key Field in Meridian, where he serves full-time. It is there that Cole has found the career and the friendships that mean so much to him.

After years of wondering what to do with his life, Cole says that the only regret he has is that he did not join the military sooner. He has worked so hard and given so much of his time to become an air traffic controller for the Air National Guard.

After volunteering for deployment to Iraq, Cole is now on active duty and will be serving there for at least



Walker

six months.

Cole is proud of serving his country and believes in what our military and government are doing to fight terrorism and, at the same time, help the Iraqi people.